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## Humanising Public Relations Research

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Despite the recent increase in qualitative studies published in the leading public relations journals, and the new emphasis on critical analyses of public relations, what continues to remain opaque is the subjective nature of the experience of public relations. Similarly, there are few accounts which problematise researchers' assumptions, interpretations and subjectivities involved in conducting research into public relations. When human interactions are overlooked, public relations strategies and effects appear to be self-fabricating, inevitable and value-free. Reports that do not speak to the processes or influences involved in the production and consumption of public relations, obscure the beliefs, values, emotions, motivations, and subsequent struggles or pleasures which suffuse the doing, perceiving and constructing of the meaning-making involved in public relations. This extends to the process of undertaking research. It is not uncommon for a researcher to write him- or herself out of a research report, on the positivistic assumption that research 'should be' objective and untainted. This ignores how the researcher's presence and cultural position inform the social shape and character of the data collected.

I will argue that public relations scholarship would benefit from more researchers employing an interpretive stance to their investigations because, in understanding communication as a co-construction of meaning, interpretive inquiry enables research to be humanised. Furthermore, I will argue that there is great heuristic value in drawing on a cultural theory framework because this allows emotions, beliefs, values, discourses and communicative behaviours to be interrogated in research, aspects that are intrinsic to how public relations as a communicative activity is constructed by those involved in producing and consuming public relations. Such an approach enables the researcher to take account of multiple and shifting cultural identities in contemporary society where, for example, new media technologies enable individuals – as creators and negotiators of new meanings – to coalesce into often fluid, fleeting, activist communities. While some scholars have drawn attention previously to the value of a cultural approach for understanding public relations, much of this work seeks to employ the notion of culture as a variable characterised by commonalities and stability that affects public relations practices (e.g. Sriramesh's body of research). More recent texts by Curtin and Gaither (2007, 2008 ) point to the dynamic, constitutive nature of culture and public relations, suggesting that individuals in cultural contexts may interact with public relations practices in less stable, predictable ways, interpreting public relations messages differently from that of the message source. Pompper's article (2005) indicates that public relations' publics have multiple, shifting cultural identities. To date, however, the public relations scholarship has been relatively impervious to the more nuanced cultural perspective that is articulated in the field of the

sociology of organisations but which may offer valuable insights for understanding public relations (e.g. Daymon 2000, 2003; Martin 2002; Parker 2000; Ybema, Daymon, Veenswijk 2005).

Despite the concerns of the Radical Roundtable to focus primarily on public relations in society, I want to draw on the organisational culture literature in order to raise questions about the way we view public relations, including its role as both constituting and constitutive of societal culture. I will argue that public relations researchers need to train both their research gaze and the articulation of their findings upon the following:

1. The experiences of individuals and groups who are involved in constructing and negotiating meaning through the production of public relations processes, i.e. concentrating on public relations practitioners and their experiences (a) in organisations, (b) within the occupation of public relations, (c) in different societal cultures. This means undertaking ethnographic or phenomenological research.

2. The experiences of individuals and groups as publics in the production and negotiation of meaning, i.e. concentrating on individuals as publics, both external to organisations as well as publics within organisations (as employees or temporary workers, for example).

Finally, public relations scholars need to introduce reflexivity into their writing about research (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000, Daymon and Holloway 2002). This involves self-identification as well as discussion of the way in which their own philosophical and cultural perspectives affect selectivity, interpretation and interaction with their research participants, sites and material.

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